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Pocket pool playboy

One gay man offers an homage to the magazine
that reached him with words, not bunnies

Sometimes I think *Playboy* saved my life. At a young age, I discovered the boxes of old issues stacked in the extra closet in my bedroom. My parents used it to store all types of memories, none quite as sweet and suggestive as my father's piles of glossy porn. Lacking the bodies I lusted after, *Playboy* nonetheless transformed my understanding of sex, sexuality and that naughty, shameful little thing that felt so good—masturbation.

Although I grew up in a secular household and avoided a great deal of religious indoctrination, I absorbed much of my mother's residual guilt that plagued her as a recovering Catholic. As an 11-year-old, I thought my newfound nightly habit was damnable and dangerous, not to mention messy.

Like many young men, I started masturbating frequently as a child. I think my first enjoyment of this rhythmic delicacy occurred when I was in the fourth grade. It terrified me. It was as if my penis were acting of its own accord without any guidance from my usual sense of social decorum. I didn't know what I was doing. I stumbled upon my stiffy, touched to touch, and soon I'd made a mess on my bed sheets. What would Mom say to me when she did the laundry on the weekend? It was sure to stain. I was sure to get into trouble. Nothing that felt this good could be permissible.

That didn't stop me from doing it again. And again. And again. I knew the warts were going to start sprouting on my palms soon, or that I would wake up with failing eyesight within weeks. I found myself in the darkness of the late night, kneeling at my bed, post-climax, praying for help. Asking someone or something—was it God?—to help me control my urges. I was convinced I was up to no good. I was simply a little pervert who couldn't keep his hands out of his underwear to save his life.

And then I was saved. Not by Jesus or some other higher power, but by my father's *Playboys*. In May 1986, the regular column "Men" showed me the way. It was startling. It was shocking. It said it was OK to masturbate.

Pounding your pud. Choking the chicken. Spanking the monkey. Rubbing one out. Busting a nut. Whacking and jacking and beating and jerking off. The list went on and on, and the author triumphantly celebrated each nuance of masturbation, defending his and every other person's right to the pursuit of self-serve happiness.

I was stunned. To be sure, the writer was discussing the finer points of the straight male's sexual imagination and the hard thumping enjoyment that flows from it. But that didn't matter. I was OK. I was normal. I wasn't a freak

or a pervert for enjoying sex all by myself!

It would take me a few years to realize that the objects of my fantasies were not necessarily considered appropriate. As a middle school student, when I started noticing the hair in other boys' armpits or tried to catch a glimpse of their crotches in the locker room, I struggled to reconcile my desires with everyone else's expectations. But somewhere deep down, I knew it was OK to feel the way I did. At the very least, I didn't feel ashamed that I was attracted to men. Awkward, maybe. Embarrassed even. But not ashamed. There was nothing inherently wrong with me. It might mean that others wouldn't like me, but I became aware of a strength and determination that would guide me through much of my sexual awakening in the years to come.

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ILLUSTRATION BY BRADLEY PARKER

Having exorcised the demons from my masturbating, I think I may have freed myself from other stigmas associated with my queer sexuality. That's not to say I haven't struggled to accept being gay or to feel comfortable having sex with men. I have. But like many gay and bi men, I've overcome my butt-phobia and gag reflex with lots of practice. Fortunately, I've been able to untie those knots with relative ease and enjoyment.

I can't help but think the column in *Playboy* helped create a foundation within me as a teen-ager that afforded me an entirely new perspective about my sexuality. If I felt OK about doing it by myself, why not with someone else? Why not with someone else of the same sex? It released a terrible burden of sex negativity, freeing me to be the sex-loving person I am today.

So think twice before you laugh at someone who swears he reads magazines like *Playboy* "just for the articles."

■ **OUTWORD** is written by members of Portland Gay Men Writing. Writers interested in contributing or joining should call Alan or Geoffrey at (503) 223-5907.